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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which colleagues who have traditionally not worked together, or even met each other, can share experience-based knowledge. It discusses electronic information networks in Canadian colleges, and examines how these networks do and do not develop into communities of learning or communities of practice through sharing conceptualized knowledge, and common values and goals. The study aims to assess the 3-year experiment of creating numerous affinity groups, or national networks of college administrators, staff, faculty, and students who administer, teach, or study in the same domain or discipline. The author sent out an e-mail questionnaire to 134 randomly selected participants in 34 Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) affinity groups which had been in existence for at least 6 months. The author conducted in-depth interviews with nine of the 51 respondents. The author also reviewed case studies and used his own experience in meetings and projects. The findings cover motivation for joining affinity groups, development of trust and common values in face to face meetings, the need for ongoing dialogue, the role of technology in achieving group objectives, and working productively with sectoral councils and initiatives. (Contains 28 references.) (NB)

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Not just another Listserve:

The Contribution of ACCC Affinity Groups to Knowledge Exchange, Sectoral Initiatives and Innovation

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Major Research Paper
presented by

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to

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To Paul Gallagher (1930-2003), one of the founding fathers of the Canadian community college movement, an inspiring leader and innovator during his tenure as president of three different colleges in Québec and British Columbia, and a cherished advisor and friend of many over his long and fruitful career.

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"Knowledge is experience. Everything else is just information" **- Einstein**

1.0 BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

This paper is about new ways of sharing experience-based knowledge between colleagues who have traditionally not worked together, or even met one another. It is about electronic information networks in colleges[1] that may, or may not, develop into communities of learning or communities of practice through the sharing of contextualized knowledge, and common values and goals. It is about the growing value of informal leaders and informal networks in an era of such rapid change that institutions that have traditionally served us well are looking for alternate ways of adjusting to change more rapidly. It is about institutions becoming more innovative and more responsive to the differing learning needs of their increasingly diverse learners or, in the words of Terry O'Banion, becoming "learning colleges."[2] Ultimately, it concerns the fundamental values colleges have had since their creation of making education and training more accessible and relevant to learners and to the needs of the rapidly changing labour market and employers.

The paper is the final assignment for the Masters' of Management in Leadership of National Voluntary Sector Associations program at McGill University. The program was funded by the McConnell Foundation and my participation was partly funded by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC)[3] to which I am most grateful. The Master's program is based on the most recent knowledge of leadership for not-for-profit national associations and the sharing of experience between 40 voluntary sector leaders, ranging from the United Way and YMCA Canada to the Canadian Education Association. All assignments had to be very practical in nature, relevant to one's own organization and relevant to the sector in general.

I have chosen to examine and assess the three-year experiment of creating numerous "affinity groups" or national networks of college administrators, staff, faculty and students, who administer, teach or study in the same domain or discipline. A handful of similar networks of deans of transportation, technology, business and allied health have existed over the past decade and have inspired other sectors to think about developing their own networks. For the purposes of this study, all network groups, old or new, will be referred to as "affinity groups."

With the development of information technology and a standard listserve, it became much easier to connect those who wanted to rapidly develop a network based on a similar "affinity", area of interest and/or professional responsibility. The listserve appeared to be the best way of facilitating the sharing of ideas and resources across traditional institutional and provincial boundaries, or perhaps even the undertaking of national learning initiatives where these might be useful.

Since 1999, the ACCC Secretariat has encouraged the creation and development of affinity groups as a service to its members. Some 50 groups now exist[4], involving more than 2,500 participants from ACCC's 150 institutional members.

The same timeframe also saw the creation and development of many national sectoral councils, or sectoral initiatives, in which national associations of employers and employees came together to look after the national dimensions of human resources (HR) in their sector, be it the information technology, steel, nursing or cultural sectors[5]. Funded in part by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), these councils develop pan-Canadian approaches to labour market and HR planning and learning. They are, therefore, generally keen on the college system being able to interact with them in a more coordinated manner. Affinity groups seemed to be the ideal vehicle for response to that need and many of them have taken up the challenge.

The central questions for this study are the following:

- Have affinity groups fulfilled expectations? If so, how did they do this? And if not, then why not?
- What conditions could make them more effective and relevant?
- How might the national secretariat support them in the most effective manner?
- The "Wicked Question"[6]: Can you have anything truly national in the Canadian education and training domain?

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1 The word "college" is used generically throughout this paper to encompass the slightly differing realities of community colleges, institutes of technology, colleges of applied arts and sciences, cégeps, university colleges and specialized institutes, all members of ACCC.

2 Terry O'Banion, A Learning College of the 21st Century. (American Council on Education and Oryx Press, 1997).

3 A voluntary membership-based organization, ACCC is the national and international voice of 150 Canadian colleges and institutes. The 60-person Secretariat is based in Ottawa. For more information, visit www.accc.ca.

4 For the current list of these affinity groups, visit www.accc.ca/networking.

5 For more information and the current list of Sector Councils, visit The Alliance of Sector Councils (TASC) website at www.councils.org.

6 Wicked questions are those that few dare to ask but which often reveal the true stake in an issue. Brenda Zimmerman, Curt Lindberg, and Paul Plsek, Edgeware: Insights from Complexity Science for Health Care Leaders (VHA Press, 1998).

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2.0 METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

Having determined the questions to be answered, it was important to first search the existing literature on networks and their underlying values and outcomes to find out who else was facing the same challenges and what lessons had been drawn from their experiences that might illuminate our own. As the McGill program was about new kinds of leadership, I also looked at some of the most recent literature on the changing roles of leaders and, in particular, the growing role of informal leaders of networks such as the affinity groups.

Armed with the wisdom of the literature on these subjects, the empirical research then conducted by the author involved four main sources of information or knowledge:

1. An e-mail questionnaire sent out to 134 randomly selected participants in 34 of the ACCC affinity groups which had been in existence for at least six months;

2. More in-depth interviews with nine of the 51 respondents who were playing informal leadership roles within their respective affinity groups;

3. A review of the case studies on college-sector council collaboration, which had been written jointly by a council and a college representative and published by the ACCC and The Alliance of Sector Councils;[1]

4. The author's own experience with numerous joint meetings and projects between college affinity groups and sectoral councils or other national sectoral initiatives.

The structure of the paper reflects the methodology presented. The first main section will look at some of the most recent literature on knowledge, learning, innovation, informal leadership and other existing networks, mainly in the United States and Australia, to inform our study on the knowledge sharing and common practice of the groups. The subsequent section will situate the study in its current context by presenting a brief synopsis of the national learning challenges faced by Canada and the colleges at present. The main results and lessons drawn from the empirical research will then be presented in seven thematic points, followed by some reflections on the deeper added value of such network or affinity groups and a series of conclusions and recommendations.

It is hoped that the recommendations and lessons learned will provide a source of knowledge and information for participants of such networks and, above all, be useful in helping them to decide how to function more effectively nationally in better meeting the lifelong learning needs of Canadians. It is also hoped that other national membership associations will find the lessons useful for their own attempts at increasing the national sharing of knowledge and the voluntary coordination of initiatives of their membership base.

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[1] View the case studies posted on the ACCC website at www.accc.ca/english/Publications/studies_reports_papers.cfm

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 The Social Dimension of Knowledge, Learning and Innovation

When thinking about learning and knowing, we often think of them as entirely individual acts of selecting and integrating bits of information into one's own unique framework or world view. It is useful, however, without going into an entire review of the theory of knowing and learning, to note that the review of some of the most recent literature affirms that the social dimension of knowledge and learning is the most crucial.

A number of American academics, practitioners and consultants, whom we will look at below, have been converging recently around the proposition that knowledge is not the same as information and cannot be disseminated in the same way. Their conclusions are based on extensive work with a number of large American corporations, government departments and not-for-profits, and their works are regularly featured in the *Harvard Business Review*, the Peter Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management publications and the *MITSloan Management Review*.

That we are in a knowledge economy is by now a commonly accepted view. John Seely Brown, Chief Scientist of Xerox Corporation, Director of its Palo Alto Research Centre and co-founder of the Institute for Research on Learning posits a new law for this economy:

> " In a time when both the rate of change and the growth of knowledge keep accelerating, the more people you have who can learn more in a shorter time, the more competitive you will be." [1]

He advises firms, including his own, to undergo transformation so as to engage the full force of the firm in the creation and dissemination of knowledge and innovation. But he quickly adds that disseminating knowledge and encouraging innovation is not only a matter of sending information on a listserve as many believed in the early heady days of the Internet revolution. He argues that "this process is largely social; it depends on the credibility and standing of an idea's champions..."[2] Furthermore, the successful creation, transmission and adoption of knowledge is dependent on "the adoption of shared beliefs" and a "shared understanding of purpose." We are far from the transmission of impersonal bits of data via a listserve.

In a book Seely Brown co-authored with Paul Duguid entitled *The Social Life of Information*[3], he argues convincingly, on the basis of dozens of case studies, that knowledge cannot be captured very much in databases and circulated impersonally via the Web. It resides in people, in overt and tacit forms, and requires a community of learning or practice to be truly shared and adapted to each and every new situation that presents itself. Without knowing the person or the context out of which the knowledge arose it ceases to be knowledge that can be applied usefully.

> "Information...is on its own not enough to produce actionable knowledge. Practice too is required. And for practice, it's best to look to a community of practitioners."[4]

The corollary to that conclusion is that learning is a social process, which begins in our early years through contact with a family and friends and continues throughout our life, be it in a classroom, at the workplace or perhaps via an Internet chat group. Learning is also about whom the learner is (identity), what is important to him/her at that point in time (motivation to learn) and who he/she is attempting to become (personal or professional objectives). And so he/she will not entrust such crucial aspects of his being to just anyone who passes by. Hence, communities of respected peers or colleagues are often the most useful sources of new learning and knowledge. Consider the importance to the entire scientific community of peer review in respected journals.

Richard McDermott is another practitioner and consultant to many corporations who has focused a lot of his research and practice on the social nature of knowledge and learning in understanding how best to nurture the development of innovation in the workplace, another crucial determinant of organizational survival. In his chapter on "Why Information Technology Inspired but Cannot Deliver Knowledge Management" from the book Knowledge and Communities[5], he affirms that:

> "Knowledge is an affair of experience and of community, and hence the sharing of knowledge requires a combination of human and information systems... Sharing knowledge involves guiding someone through our thinking or using our insights to help them see their situation better... Professionals do not just cut and paste from best practices, but they use their past experiences and knowledge to inform their analysis of the data and information." [6]

The sharing of knowledge is therefore much more complicated than perhaps we thought initially. To go one step further to the creation of innovative solutions is a matter of a creative mind opening up to new ideas and experiences received from trusted others, preferably, and which he/she then figuratively plays around with until a new idea or configuration appears and takes shape:

> "The innovator will allow different views of the challenge or reality lead to different perspectives and allow the frameworks or perspectives to seep into each other, to generate new ideas and solutions. And to generate new ideas amongst a group you need to understand how the others conceptualized their solution or system more than all the details of the system. Once you can do so then you can let the process of new thinking influence your own." [7]

What then are the implications for this sharing of knowledge according to McDermott?

> "Rather than identifying information needs and tools, we identify the community that cares about a topic and then enhance their ability to think together, stay in touch with each other, share ideas with each other, and connect with other communities. Ironically, to leverage knowledge we need to focus on the community that owns it and the people who use it, not the knowledge itself."[8]

If we are interested in rapid and effective learning, knowledge exchange and innovation, via networks or affinity groups, then we should be looking at such issues as nurturing and supporting communities of learning and practice. This would include helping them to focus on their priority issues, rather than simply setting up listserves and expecting them to develop on their own.

McDermott also argues that the formal organization should actively support their more informal networks of learning because they come to realize the contributions such networks are making to the crucial aspect of the organization's competitiveness, namely creative people exchanging knowledge rapidly and applying it effectively in new and innovative ways. McDermott concludes by identifying four types of challenges that organizations face if they are to be successful in their knowledge creation and learning efforts:

> "1. The technical challenge to design human and information systems that not only make information available, but help community members think together;
>
> 2. The social challenge to develop communities that share knowledge and still maintain enough diversity of thought to encourage thinking rather than sophisticated copying;

3. The management challenge to create an environment that truly values sharing knowledge; and,

4. The personal challenge to be open to the ideas of others, willing to share ideas, and maintain a thirst for new knowledge."[9]

To meet those challenges will require new types of leadership, which is the topic addressed by Margaret J. Wheatley in her influential book Leadership and the New Science. Wheatley argues convincingly that the complexity and interconnectedness of our reality requires that we adopt a corresponding leadership style which is inspired by the holistic sciences of Quantum physics and biology rather than the old Newtonian paradigm of linear or mechanical approaches which mirrored the industrial production process of earlier times.

In a complex interconnected age, Wheatley argues, leadership is much more about facilitating the creation of partnerships, relationships and networks than about the development of linear five-year management plans which never come to be. More and more people now play informal leadership roles which are not associated with formal positions and organizational charts but with the creativity, relevancy and timeliness of their ideas spread through influential informal networks.[10] At this point in time, "...the issue is no longer control, but dynamic connectedness" [11]and the main leadership challenge is being able to facilitate processes that respect diversity while being able to arrive at a congruence of vision and purpose. Then you can let the individuals use their creativity and experience to implement the vision and overall objectives in their specific area of expertise. She proposes that the old saw about "critical mass," a useful concept in the old physics, should now be replaced by "critical connectedness," an essential concept in quantum physics.

The source of continuing relevancy, dynamism and survival for an organization thus becomes a continuous flow of useful information or knowledge, which can be rapidly assessed, processed and adapted to the changing reality. And the more diverse the information or knowledge is, the better for the organization as it will bring a more complete vision of the complex reality which cannot be apprehended by any one person or organization anymore.[12] Continuous feedback on initiatives is also important to allow for continuous adjustment of action in light of new information and the changing reality one is now in the process of "co-creating" with others.

The role of the informal facilitator, moderator or leader of a network group becomes ever so important in Wheatley's estimate. That person needs to know how to listen to others, how to connect people to each other, how to facilitate participatory group processes to arrive at common views of the future, and how to elicit and act upon feedback and criticism. But then again significant rewards await such a volunteer leader, including connectedness, meaning, and a sense of contributing to commonly held values and visions, as we shall see with the next author.

In a concluding powerful image, Wheatley argues that "meaningful information," or "knowledge" in Seely Brown's language, is the most important commodity these days:

> "Meaningful information lights up a network and moves through it like a windswept brushfire."[13]

3.2 Networks and Communities of Practice

Based on some of the same findings outlined above and those of his consultancy work with cross-divisional internal learning and innovation networks within IBM, Apple, Shell, the World Bank, McKinsey and others, Etienne Wenger decided to call these new networks "Communities of Practice." He proceeded to analyze their characteristic features, effectiveness, conditions for success and their

place within modern organizational structures and cultures. In the initial book he authored entitled Communities of Practice - Learning, Meaning and Identity[14], and the recently-published Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge[15], jointly authored with Richard McDermott and William Snyder, his findings have started to influence research and debates in the US academic and corporate world.

Wenger begins by emphasizing the social and practical nature of knowledge that we have already looked at and then defines "communities of practice" as:

> "... groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion for a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."[16]

He goes on to explain that the idea for the concept came from his study of the history of craft guilds in the Middle Ages, and the more recent apprentice-journeyman relationship. Both had effective communities of knowledge sharing or learning embedded within and focused on the practice of a trade or profession.

According to Wenger, the main characteristics that differentiate an information network from a more valuable community of practice are that the participants engage in a mutual and ongoing manner, they develop a joint vision and come to share a common repertoire of useful resources and shared experiences. Wenger implies that you can have useful networks of information exchange, but to leverage the maximum knowledge and innovation out of such groups they must take some minimum common decisions on their role, on common values and issues, and on their scope of intervention, while still functioning informally.

Communities of practice differ from work teams within an organization because they are not set up by the organization itself, are fully voluntary and do not focus on a product or service but on an exchange of knowledge and experience between a group of people sharing a similar affinity.

The corporations studied found that the main benefits of communities of practice are that they help drive strategy, start new lines of business, solve problems quickly, transfer best practices, develop professional skills and help companies recruit and retain talent.[17] It is little wonder that this organizational form is drawing interest in corporate America.

A specific link was also found to exist between participation in networks or communities of practice and the capacity to generate innovative solutions. Wenger cites many examples of the increased creativity of employees when they are part of a community of practice beyond the divisional or team boundaries of large corporations. Bell Labs found that their best performers were consistently those scientists who were members of strong networks. Studies of the software development industry concluded that:

> "there is an increased creativity and effectiveness for programmers when they are part of internal and external communities of practice compared to when they are not."[18]

Shell estimates that their communities of practice have saved the company between two million and five million dollars and increased revenue by more than $13 million in one year. The World Bank now places funding at the disposal of its many communities of practice in order to become more of a knowledge organization.[19]

Wenger also notes that Peter Senge, author of the seminal book The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization, concludes in an article on why organizations still aren't learning that:

> "We're finding again and again that the guiding principle is that significant innovations must be diffused through informal, self-organizing networks, through horizontal communities of practice. How you strengthen these communities is the key to how you disseminate innovation and maintain innovators."[20]

At the same time, Wenger and the others are clear that these communities are not the panacea to all problems and can sometimes become just as constraining and limiting as more formal organizations when in the wrong hands or influence. Their main contention is that they are one of the best new organizational forms to manage knowledge and stimulate innovation, as long as the more formal organization is there to then transform and market the useful concepts into products and services. Such networks are meant to be a necessary complement to the more formal structures and not a replacement. But the enthusiasm often typical of American management trends is clear:

> "Leading knowledge organizations are increasingly likely to view communities of practice not merely as useful auxiliary structures, but as foundational structures on which to build an organization... Communities of Practice are the new frontier."[21]

To date, most of the examples in these studies come from corporate America and from knowledge networks which straddle divisional and location boundaries within one single organization, albeit mostly large and multinational ones. What are the results of such networks in the education and not-for-profit association sectors? There is not a large amount of literature on this so far, but two cases are worth examining briefly: one of an international network on the environment and the other in the technical and vocational training sector in Australia.

Frances Westley, Professor of Management at McGill, has studied the case of the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG), an international network linked to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).[22] Since 1984 it has grown from 14 members to the current 653 members from 150 countries, and has only three staff members to support the network and its actions internationally. But it has been able to exchange high-quality information and mobilize 5,000 people around the world to successfully save more than 20 species.

The most highly valued characteristic of the CBSG by its membership is "the exchange and sharing of information, with free dissemination of products and data..." and "its ability to facilitate mutual-problem solving by people with diverse interests...".[23] One of the key factors underlying its ability to remain a network for so long is that the small staff in the Minneapolis office can only act as catalysts and advisers, not as official executives.

As part of her study, Westley inquired as to why they persisted for so long in the face of such a huge challenge. The study identified five main motivators for participant involvement and network survival:

1. The cause connects with participants' core values and emotions;

2. There is immense satisfaction from working with others in the network to the point that it now acts as an important reference group for members;

3. Participation in the CBSG is seen as making a real difference and provides a sense of accomplishment that gives added purpose and meaning to their own lives;

4. CBSG provided an opportunity to do something in spite of the old organizational structures they also belonged to, a forum where action is more important than custom, and where communication is more important than hierarchy; and,

5. There was a sense of duty and responsibility to act on their moral values.

Westley concludes that "CBSG indeed represents a global social innovation"[24] and that it provides people with new ways of becoming involved and making a difference on concerns that they feel strongly about. She further argues that traditional organizations require allegiance or loyalty and some subservience to the greater organizational good, whilst networks are loose, with no hierarchy or obligation beyond what one wants to contribute. This allows and encourages individual creativity and innovativeness. But she also notes that they do require a new type of informal leadership which is adept at facilitation, process design, conflict management, and cross-cultural sensitivity.

Finally Westley underlines "the need to do more research around the affinity between the network form and the type of social problem."[25] This study takes up the challenge by asking how appropriate is the affinity group model for the type of national educational and learning challenges we face?

A recent experiment with communities of practice in Australia's technical training system, evaluated by John Mitchell, provides us with the first and only study found on its application in the college domain.[26] Mitchell presented his findings at the Second World Conference of Colleges and Polytechnics held in Australia in March of 2002.[27] He and Susan Young argue that communities of practice are reshaping partnerships in the Australian vocational education and training system. They explain that the communities of practice were recently established in the context of a need to rapidly implement the new National Training Framework in Australia, which required:

> "...new forms of partnership arrangements and new forms of communication to meet the challenges of the recently-established industry-led, demand-driven training system."[28]

Sixteen communities of practice were established in 2001 by a national reform secretariat to bring together employers, involved government personnel and training providers, including many of the Australian colleges, around the challenge of implementing the new reform. The networks were designed to focus on one objective from the beginning, which is not the usual network creation process. Bringing employers, employee associations, and government civil servants (at the national and state levels) together with training providers is, however, an interesting experiment in sectoral initiatives worth following in light of the roles ACCC Affinity Groups play in their own national sectoral initiative.

Having analyzed the overall preliminary results of the Australian groups and having presented their communities of practice case studies in the tourism and the wine industries, Mitchell and Young conclude that Communities of Practice are

> "...a viable means for fostering the development of relationships between VET (Vocational Education & Training) providers and industry clients, for the benefit of industry...(and) have the potential to accelerate, intensify, enrich and enhance the implementation of the national training system."[29]

Furthermore, these groups resulted in the added benefit of assisting in the development of partnerships amongst training providers, such as colleges, in many different states.

In the larger study, Mitchell makes specific recommendations to the Australian college system regarding the viability and sustainability of these communities:

> "From the College, there needs to be recognition of the value of the forum as a knowledge management and problem-solving tool, a valuable professional development activity and a potential source of innovation. There also needs to be some financial support to sustain the community."[30]

The communities must also continue to be of direct relevance to the local challenges faced, as well as the national objectives, if they are to continue existing and they must identify the "convener" or main "driver" of the group for it to be functional and regular. They also identify the limitations of the communities of practice should they become too dependent on one individual convener or coordinator or if they become so large that members start to feel disconnected or marginalized. They argue it is better to subdivide the group or create more manageable sub-committees to retain that sense of community.

In a country as vast and diverse as Australia, they conclude that communities of practice needed some face-to-face meetings in order to be functional.[31] Otherwise a sense of "disconnectedness" develops and the sense of identification remains too superficial to be fully productive. This conclusion provided a useful insight to explore in our own empirical study.

Finally they postulate that the new kinds of partnerships developed between colleges and employers via these communities had the potential to place Australia's VET system at the leading edge of the vocational and technical training systems worldwide.

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1 John Seely Brown, "Sustaining the Ecology of Knowledge", Leader to Leader, vol. 12 (Spring 1999), p. 6.

2 Ibid., p. 2.

3 John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, The Social Life of Information (Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

4 Ibid., p. 135.

5 McDermott, Richard, "Why Information Technology Inspired but Cannot Deliver Knowledge Management," Knowledge and Communities, Lesser, Fontaine and Slusher editors (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000).

6 Ibid., pp. 23-25.

7 Ibid., p. 24.

8 Ibid., p. 28.

9 Ibid., p. 34.

10 Margaret J. Wheatley, Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World (McGraw-Hill, 1999), pp. 151, 165. See also Malcolm Gladwell, The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference (Little Brown & Company, 2000) on how the right idea sent by a respected person to an influential network can rapidly "tip the balance" and start an influential trend.

11 Ibid., p. 25.

12 See also Margaret J. Wheatley, "Innovation Means Relying on Everyone's Creativity, Leader to Leader, vol. 20 (Spring 2001).

13 Margaret J. Wheatley, Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World (McGraw-Hill, 1999), p. 151.

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15 Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder, Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge (Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

16 Ibid., p. 4.

17 Etienne Wenger and William M. Snyder, "Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier," Harvard Business Review (Jan. 2000), pp. 140-141.

18 Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder, Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), pp. 235, 238.

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22 Frances Westley, "Not on our Watch – The Biodiversity Crisis Global Collaboration Response," Organizational Dimensions of Global Change – No Limits to Cooperation, David Cooperrider and Jane E. Dutton, editors (Sage Publications, 1999).

23 Ibid., p. 95.

24 Ibid., p. 111.

25 Ibid., p. 113.

26 John Mitchell, The Potential for Communities of Practice to Underpin the National Training Framework. (Australian National Training Authority, April 2002).

27 Visit www.wfworldcongress.com/program_topics.htm to view the presentation as well as many others outlining current challenges facing the college system in various countries.

28 Ibid., p. 1.

29 Ibid., p. 10.

30 John Mitchell, p.89

31 Ibid., pp. 6-7.

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4.0 THE CANADIAN CONTEXT IN WHICH THE AFFINITY GROUPS OPERATE

Before examining the results of the empirical study on the ACCC Affinity Groups, it is important to understand the context in which these groups operate and to which they respond, both at the national policy level and as a network of colleges.

At the national level, the federal government has recently released its long-awaited proposed Innovation Strategy in two volumes, one concerning skills and learning for Canadians entitled "Knowledge Matters," and the other about investing in people, knowledge and opportunity entitled "Achieving Excellence."[1]

The overall objective is stated succinctly as exploring "what Canada must do to ensure equality of opportunity and economic innovation in a knowledge-based economy and society." As these are very germane to the issues explored in this paper, a quick review of the main proposed national objectives is in order, including the potential implications or involvement of colleges in their realization.

The objectives which the Government of Canada is proposing in its paper "Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians" are the following:

- Increase the proportion of Canadians who have some post-secondary education from 39 percent to 50 percent over the next decade;
- Double the number of apprentices completing a certification program over the next decade, especially in light of the shortage of trades people already upon us;
- Make it possible for all high school graduates to access post-secondary education if they so desire;
- Have businesses and employers in general increase by one-third their annual investment in training per employee within five years;
- Increase the number of Canadian adults who access lifelong learning opportunities by one million in all sectors and segments of society within five years;
- Reduce the number of adults with low literacy skills by 25 percent over the next decade.[2]

The college system reaches into 900 Canadian communities, has close ties with employers and a unique expertise in apprenticeships as well as essential employability skills training and recognition of learning. As such, the Government of Canada expects that the college system will be a key partner in the realization of the ambitious goals framed by the Innovation Strategy.

Although the actual additional learning will take place locally and will require provincial funding increases, what are the national dimensions of that learning challenge which colleges are being called upon to respond to?

1. They are being asked to facilitate the mobility of Canadians by improving national recognition of learning. This requires the establishment of equivalencies between programs and certifications, transferability protocols between institutions and the guarantee of common quality professional standards;

2. They are being asked to increase the essential employability skills such as literacy, teamwork, self-managed learning and information-communication skills for all Canadians including aboriginal learners, but these skills are more difficult than technical ones to train to and will need a concerted effort and systematic exchange of experiences and results if a significant leap is to be attained in the time needed;

3. Increasing the amount of distance and e-learning which is available to Canadians is seen as important. This again requires more coordination amongst consortia of colleges and universities now coming together and an increasing ease of recognition of that learning by other institutions nationally;

4. Increasing the number and scope of National Sectoral Councils is seen as an important vehicle for attaining the objective of significantly upgrading the skills of the existing workforce. This has and will require colleges to develop their own national sectoral networks to be able to interact with the equivalent employer sectoral councils. This will allow them to act in a more coordinated fashion nationally to meet national goals and accreditation norms set by the sector councils; and,

5. Developing an integrated and more transparent approach to the recognition of foreign credentials and work experience to facilitate the integration of the increasing number of skilled immigrants recruited to Canada to meet shortages. This again requires national agreements, data banks and dialogue on what foreign credentials equate to in Canada.

As we can see, the number of national aspects to these challenges are significant and will require the colleges to collaborate with each other on national efforts more than ever before.

There are two objectives within the "Achieving Excellence: Investing in People, Knowledge and Opportunity" part of the Innovation Strategy that will involve colleges:

- Increasing the amount of applied research and innovation that goes on within Canadian colleges, as there is significant potential and Canada's application rate of research is very low compared to international standards and,

- Increasing Canadian college capacity to transfer those new technologies and innovations to Canadian companies; this applies especially to small- and medium-sized enterprises that employ the largest proportion of Canadians but sometimes have more difficulties integrating new technologies into their workplaces.

While neither effort requires greater national coordination, they do still require a significant increase in the amount of exchanges of experiences, new knowledge and policies, if the college system itself is to be more of a learning and innovative network.

The ACCC has already started to respond to many of these national challenges through a series of dialogues, working groups, position papers and planning sessions within the college system, and then with its government, private sector and voluntary sector partners. A first National Symposium between Colleges and Sectoral Councils/Initiatives was held in the winter of 2001 to stimulate greater exchanges and collaboration on joint national efforts.

The first Federal Government-College Symposium, entitled "Building a Productive Partnership" and held over two days in September 2001, brought together some 60 college CEOs and 40 senior

government ministers, deputy-ministers and director-generals, along with the national leaders from business, union and voluntary sector associations. It involved:

> "...(exploring) avenues for building productive partnerships among governments, colleges and institutions to approach Canada's skills, learning and innovation challenges with a greater sense of common purpose."[3]

A reading of the full 25-page report highlights the scope of the coordinated national response desired now by the colleges themselves and their key partners in government, business, unions and the voluntary sector.

What do other voices have to say about the national challenges facing colleges in Canada? Two of the most prolific and influential authors on the Canadian community college movement to date are Paul Gallagher and John Dennison. They have separately or jointly co-authored histories of the creation and development of the community colleges and well-researched essays on the trends and challenges facing these colleges in their more recent history.

In his book entitled Challenge and Opportunity: Canada's Community Colleges at the Crossroads[4], Dennison identifies some of the major factors that are pushing change in the college system. These factors are a society focused on knowledge and human resources as the chief source of competitiveness; pressure from students for greater access; and, national recognition of learning and transferability of credentials. Greater relevancy to the world of work and pressure for more collaboration between colleges and universities, the government, the private sector and NGOs[7] were also factors. Dennison concludes that:

> "If there is a general theme which has emerged in the numerous studies of colleges in every region of the country, it is a call for a more responsive, more coordinated, and better articulated system of public post-secondary education..."[5]

In Paul Gallagher's article in the same book, he goes even further in arguing for more of a coordinated national effort on the part of colleges:

> "The new environment within which community colleges now work suggests that traditional levels and kinds of ...collaboration will not be sufficient...In a globally interdependent world, it is imperative that our colleges think and act in even more collaborative ways."[6]

He also advocates for even closer collaboration between colleges and national councils:

> "It would now be prudent for them (colleges) to collaborate fully with initiatives to develop nation-wide training standards and to design programs and activities that increase the employment mobility of their graduates."[7]

In his opening speech to the aforementioned first National Symposium of Colleges and National Sector Councils and Initiatives, Gallagher went further in calling for a transition from an era of "polite partnership" between college and employer associations to one of active, coordinated and "comfortable cohabitation."

The main American author on these issues, Dr. Terry O'Banion, has argued in his recent books[8] and numerous articles that the main challenge of the community college systems in the USA and Canada

is to become true "learning colleges" which can more rapidly adapt to the requirements of its learners in the Information Age.

If all organizations in the corporate sector are to become more innovative and truly transform into organizations which promote continuous employee learning, then surely the knowledge institutions, those responsible for preparing learners to be productive future employees and for upgrading the existing workforce, must be in the same kind of continuous learning and innovative mode in order to remain responsive and relevant to the changing learner.

> "If the concept of the learning college cannot come to full fruition in the community college, the community college we know today may cease to exist, and the community college we dream of for the future may never come to be."[9]

In conclusion, it is apparent from the objectives proposed by the Canadian Government in the area of skills, learning and innovation and the analysis of influential authors on the Canadian college system, that colleges need to make a leap in the quantity and quality of their learning and innovation capacity. To do so, establishing and expanding national partnerships, amongst themselves and with other national partners, is essential. Can affinity groups contribute to that leap and how can they do so? These are the questions at the centre of the empirical study carried out amongst affinity group participants.

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1 Government of Canada, Achieving Excellence: Investing in People, Knowledge and Opportunity, (2002)and Government of Canada, Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians, (2002). Both volumes are available at http://www.innovationstrategy.gc.ca.

2 See Knowledge Matters: Skills & Learning for Canadians, part of the Government of Canada's Innovation Strategy at www.innovationstrategy.gc.ca to read more on these points.

3 See the full report on the ACCC website at www.accc.ca/english/advocacy/productive_partnerships/index/cfm.

4 John Dennison, ed. Challenge and Opportunity: Canada's Community Colleges at the Crossroads. (UBC Press, 1995).

5 Ibid., p. 121.

6 Ibid., p. 94.

7 Ibid., p. 263.

8 Ibid., pp. 263-264.

9 Terry O'Banion, A Learning College for the 21st Century (American Council on Education and Oryx Press, 1997). Other articles can be found on the American Association of Community Colleges website (www.aacc.nche.edu) or on the League for Innovation in the Community College website (www.league.org).

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5.0 FINDINGS OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

The empirical study results presented in this section are principally those garnered from a questionnaire sent out to 134 randomly selected participants from 34 of the ACCC Affinity Groups which have been in existence for more than six months. More in-depth phone interviews were carried out with nine of those respondents who are currently playing some type of informal leadership role within their respective group. Examples from previously written case studies on college-sector council collaborations and the author's own experience with many of these groups are also included as more detailed examples of points raised in the questionnaire and interviews.

The term "affinity group" was the name coined by ACCC when it proceeded to create a larger number of these groups, but it is employed in this study as the generic name that also includes the already-existing networks of deans of technology, allied health, business and transportation.

Overall, 51 college participants from 26 different affinity groups responded to the e-mail questionnaire. This represents a 38 percent return rate and covers over 80 percent of the affinity groups surveyed. There is at least one return from each of the nation's 13 provinces and territories. The breakdown of replies by ACCC region of the country is as follows: B.C./Yukon: 10; Alberta/NWT: 8; Sask./Man./Nunavut: 11; Ontario: 10; Québec: 3; Atlantic: 9. One third of the respondents work at colleges serving rural or remote regions.

In summary, the sample is confidently felt to be a representative one for the purposes of this study. In addition, the questionnaire was not conceived of or designed to be a quantitative evaluation, but rather to elicit reflections and suggestions concerning a relatively recent phenomenon within the system. The responses are presented in this paper around seven different themes, which relate directly to the issues we have been exploring so far. A good number of direct quotes from the questionnaires and interviews have been included in italics to allow respondents to have more of their views stated in their own words.

5.1 Motivation for Joining Affinity Groups

When asked what motivated them to join an affinity group, the respondents were looking for a vehicle to network, to exchange ideas or resources and to access nationally produced information. Close to half the respondents were also interested in working collaboratively with other colleges on challenges such as transferability and recognition of learning beyond traditional provincial borders and national accreditation of college programs by employers.

While these expectations were mostly met, the most useful unanticipated academic program benefits to participating in the affinity groups were:

- access to national labour market information to validate or inform changes in curricula;
- the opportunity to become involved in national sectoral learning initiatives that participants had previously been unaware of; and,
- access to training modules and entire courses they were given or bought from sectoral councils and other colleges.

The health and allied health sectors offer a telling example of this growing national dimension for occupations and for learning. The professional associations of registered nurses, licensed practical nurses and various types of medical technologists recently undertook an exercise in agreeing upon national equivalencies which would facilitate the rapid evaluation and recognition of all certified personnel arriving from other provinces as part of the Federal-Provincial Agreement on Internal Trade. To do so, they require the collaboration of colleges from across Canada who are preparing these future professionals or upgrading the existing ones in the field.

The first national meeting to bring together the majority of college practical nursing educators was organized and partially funded by The Canadian Association of Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) and encouraged participants to work collaboratively at the national level in comparing and equating the various provincial curricula.

The ACCC supported that first meeting and then set up an Affinity Group for LPN educators which now numbers 175 participants. The group has now gone on to select a national coordinating committee and form three thematic sub-committees, including one focusing on curriculum. It is also planning to set up a national association of LPN educators in the fall of 2002 to coincide with a national meeting of LPN registrars. The expectations of this particular affinity group have grown significantly over the past year.

The Canadian Association of Allied Health Programs (CAAHP) has existed for some time to "advance Allied Health education through cooperation and collaboration with colleagues across the nation and with other professional organizations."[1] To this effect, they submitted a brief on "The Importance of Allied Health Training Programs on the Future of Health Care in Canada" to the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada[2] and are now in the process of organizing a first national conference in 2003. Once again, the expectations of this existing affinity group are expanding into advocacy and national conference realms.

As one participant in the Allied Health Affinity Group who represented her network at a national committee of the Canadian Medical Association explained:

> *"I now definitely feel more connected to national colleagues. This experience has opened doors that were not previously available to me and which has been very fulfilling personally and professionally."*

5.2 Rapid Learning and Innovation

The empirical study confirms that participants see the affinity groups as new and sometimes very effective vehicles for:

- gaining rapid access to valuable resources and experience;
- learning the job from respected colleagues; and,
- forming relationships that encourage them to take risks and to innovate in their own institution or province.

A majority of respondents to the questionnaire and interviewees talked about accessing new information and knowledge that they could accept and apply more readily because it was coming from a respected group of colleagues, even if some had not yet met face-to-face. One active member confided that it was sometimes much easier to learn from and propose new initiatives based on interaction to colleagues outside of one's own institution and province:

> *"It depersonalizes the issues when you are part of a national network proposing changes rather than just yourself in your own institution or province."*

As two informal leaders of these groups explained, participation in these networks, and similar provincial ones, has also been an important way for them to learn about their new jobs and responsibilities much more rapidly than if they had not had the advice and resources from their colleagues across Canada who were in the same jobs:

> *"I am very aware of the synergies and creativity that is encouraged by networks of colleagues who share the same concerns. It is an excellent way of learning a new job quickly."*

> *"I relied heavily on networks of colleagues during my entire career to be successful and so I viewed the creation of such a national network to be important for me and for others."*

The use of these networks to learn new responsibilities when hired or promoted is a very relevant finding when one considers that close to 50 percent of current college staff and faculty are already between 50 and 65 years of age and are already starting to retire in significant numbers. This will necessitate a large number of promotions and hirings in the coming years. Taking part in such affinity groups could be one part of an orientation and accelerated job-training strategy.

The College Presidents' Network (CPN) and the more recently-created group of vice-presidents, are two examples of affinity groups making good use of the social network of colleagues to learn comfortably, consider innovations within their own institution and begin to act more cohesively at the national level. The CPN and ACCC hold a biannual, week-long National Executive Leadership Institute for college CEOs and Chairs of College Boards in alternating years. This has allowed many participants to learn significant aspects of their complex jobs from wise peers, develop kinships with trustworthy colleagues and become more proactive with their peers on the national scene. However, participants say that they are missing a more ongoing networking vehicle, which the CPN is not designed to meet.

The vice-presidents had met for three hours once a year at the ACCC annual conference for a number of years. ACCC created an affinity group at the request of a group of VPs who wanted to start to an exchange on common challenges with their colleagues in an ongoing manner. A call made to the ACCC contact person in each member college resulted in more than 150 vice-presidents signing up for this virtual group. A few activists within the group started sending out questions to the group on such current topics as: Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of college success tied to provincial funding; copyright issues in the use of the Internet for distance education; and, applied research experiences and policies.

In most cases, the senders received a good number of responses which they were then able to summarize for their own institution as crucial input for their own new policies. The saving of time and money by using the listserve and the wisdom of respected colleagues for learning and innovation was significant according to many. Most then returned the favour by redistributing their summaries and own new policies back to the entire network:

> *"The exchanges helped enormously. One example was the introduction of Web-based registration at our college. I asked for help and received a large number of responses, which I could use in a discussion paper on the issue at our institution and which I then shared back with my peers through the network."*

> *"I obtained very valuable help from the VP Affinity Group on four different topics over the past year: Applied Degrees, Professional Development for Faculty, Applied Research Policies and Learner-support Software. It literally saved me hours and days of work."*

As one practical participant also noted, if she is facing a new issue it is very likely that someone in the network from another province/territory has already faced that same challenge, made the initial mistakes and has some lessons and even resources to offer her.

"We really don't have the time or resources anymore to be reinventing the wheel thirteen different times."

The diversity of experiences and views was also much appreciated by many. The 13 provincial/territorial college systems have common values and goals but have evolved quite differently over the years and so an exchange of opinions and resources leads to quite a diversity of responses. As we have seen in the literature review and know from our own practice, diversity is a key ingredient for innovation. Innovation often arises in the heat of contrasting opinions and experiences being examined and confronted with an open mind. When one learns mostly in one's immediate, familiar environment, there is a danger of not being aware or open to other differing perspectives which would complete, complement and sometimes contradict one's own perspective. A complex reality can only be grasped with multiple differing viewpoints as we saw in Margaret J. Wheatley's book on leadership in a complex age.

Affinity groups, according to participants, provide a diversity of experiences and knowledge, which stimulate innovation and inspire new program offerings desired by learners. They also contribute to colleges remaining relevant and competitive.

One of the best examples of how an affinity group can work is around the issue of colleges being able to offer applied bachelor degrees in particular provinces. Participants recalled that their affinity group and the national meetings of VPs or Deans had allowed them to learn rapidly about this relatively new development from those in Alberta and BC who had experience with applied degrees. They were then able to propose new variants in their own province/territory, or submit innovative winning proposals to new provincial mechanisms for approval of applied degrees, as has happened in Ontario.[3]

Ironically, a respondent from a BC college, whose institution did not yet have approval to dispense applied degrees, used the experiences of other provinces, including Ontario, to design their own proposal. It was perhaps easier to learn about this issue from outside of the province than from the institutions they would be competing with for approval of the new degrees within the province.

The director-general from one of Quebec's cégeps also recounted how the network contacts and subsequent visits to colleges in the west during national meetings had totally transformed his vision of what a college could be. He explained that Quebec colleges are much more regimented by provincial government legislation than elsewhere. Seeing how a college manages to obtain over 50 percent of its revenues from non-Ministry of Education sources, such as contract training with business, other ministries and adult education offerings, was a true "revelation." It has led to some basic questioning of the system in Québec amongst his colleagues.

Conversely, the Technology Transfer Centres for 23 industrial sectors, which are housed within the Quebec colleges, are the envy of the rest of Canada.[4] College presidents and vice-presidents in the other provinces are learning how these dynamic centres serve large and mostly medium and small companies with advice, new technology adaptation and some training. Some VPs have then developed proposals adapted to their own communities for their own provincial/territorial governments or to federal government agencies.

In summary, affinity groups are generally found to be an effective vehicle for responding to the national dimension of college challenges, as well as stimulating collective capacity to learn and innovate much more rapidly and more economically than before. The existence of a social group of trusted colleagues whose suggestions, successes and failures are considered highly valued knowledge which can be rapidly adapted to one's own reality, and not just more information, seems to be an important facilitator for that knowledge exchange. The social dimension of knowledge, learning

and innovation we saw in the literature seems to be confirmed by the responses. The following section reaffirms that conclusion.

5.3 Face-to-Face Meetings and the Development of Trust and Common Values

In this world of technology-mediated communications and learning, it is perhaps counter-cultural, but perhaps not counter-intuitive, to hear network participants speak of the necessity of regular face-to-face meetings if the networks are to become more than listserves for information exchange. According to the large majority of respondents and informal leaders of such groups, this is inescapable if the group desires to move to national action and networking with other national sectoral councils of employers/employees.

If we reflect upon the long history of provincialism in the education and training sector in Canada, along with what is being affirmed by the literature regarding the crucial social nature of learning, this desire or affirmation is not very surprising. Face-to-face national meetings allow the development of a sense of trust, the transformation of peers who share your job title into true colleagues.

The actual meetings, held in differing locations across the country, also provide other crucial benefits according to respondents. They develop the beginning of a shared group history of professional and social events that plays a role in cementing the group sense and commitment. They also allow each region to host the group and highlight their own particular realities and achievements, which affirms the uniqueness and specific identity and contribution of each college or region to the national group. It provides that more concrete understanding of the diversity that is so crucial to successful adaptation of "best practices" elsewhere, as we have seen in the literature. As one participant from the smaller province of New Brunswick explained:

> *" I am proud to bring the particular experiences and lessons from our bilingual, well-connected and distinctive province to the national scene as well."*

Respondents explained that well run, face-to-face meetings were also helpful to the groups because they increased the motivation to use the listserve after the meetings. They also fostered a greater openness to change; lessened a sense of professional isolation; and, cultivated the sense that there was a significant national movement with agreed-to goals and action plans. All of these benefits confirm the observations of Frances Westley in her article on the value of such networks for a growing number of professionals.

It must be noted that 17 respondents (35 percent) indicated that their group had never met face to-face nationally but that they would very much like to. Those who had met were often quite eloquent in their answers:

> *"Without the trust and understanding that comes from these face-to-face meetings, the positive movement towards common national core curriculum would not likely have commenced."*

> *"Face to face provides much more give and take and exchange of ideas. It changes the dynamic significantly since the credibility of the person is being evaluated face to face. Sometimes it is easy to portray something electronically but it is different under the crucible of face to face exchanges."*

> *"We all gained an appreciation and acceptance of regional, aboriginal and francophone differences and needs."*

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In coming face-to-face with new peers, as described above, there is also an underlying process of evaluating to what extent the group participants, or at least those who come to the meetings, actually share common values. There is a significant amount of literature on leadership and management today which has shown that the vast majority of human beings still make their decisions on the basis of clear values.[5] Yet increasing diversity of value beliefs and the proclaimed secularism of education have perhaps discouraged us from admitting to that or to being open to discussing such values openly. Analysts would say that we become handicapped as we are denying a basic tenet of our action and are avoiding open discussion of differing values, which is the only way to arrive at mutually agreeable common guidelines for collective action.

The creation and development of some affinity groups appear to be closely related to the identification and sharing of common values. For example, one of the founding principles of the college system is accessibility to education for all. However, there is a growing concern about maintaining that accessibility in the face of severe funding cutbacks, and the kind of provincial government Key Performance Indicators that reward speed of completion rather than facilitating individual learners to move forward at their own pace, and in some cases, overcome significant learning difficulties. This is one of the topics being discussed by the Vice-Presidents' network.

Another common challenge preventing greater access is the problem of weakness in basic literacy, numeracy and social skills essential for any workplace, which, as one college president put it, *"prevents a significant number of Canadians from even getting to the bottom stair of the lifelong learning escalator."* An affinity group on curriculum development is now spending most of its time developing and implementing a national initiative to research and exchange best practices on how to best integrate the teaching of Essential Employability Skills into technical college curricula. It has just obtained federal funding from HRDC to carry out that research and an innovative practices exchange more thoroughly. Such training does not usually bring in large revenues to a college, but it is viewed as an essential part of their mandate.[6]

This concern with the values of the college system is also reflected in an active search for better ways of including, welcoming and retaining aboriginal students who are growing in number. The recent creation of an ACCC Affinity Group on Aboriginal Issues and the rapid subscription of over one hundred college staff, mostly aboriginal themselves, to this group is a testimony to the important nature of this issue of values and national future. The challenge there is to find the group's informal leaders to have this group function as a viable and effective affinity group.

Respondents evoked the importance of sensing that there were enough common values to be able to work with the others. They felt that this was best done through face-to-face meetings on a regular basis. As one active group participant stated:

> *"We do share common values of quality service to our students, in spite of funding cuts and bureaucracy, and we are all in the same boat, which can make for a very strong group."*

It is perhaps advisable to articulate those common values that underpin the specific group and the overall college movement more openly, particularly those in transition.

The Fisheries Affinity Group offers a concrete example of the importance of meeting face-to-face. When the Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters (CCPFH)[7] launched a national effort to upgrade fish harvesters' knowledge and skills, they invited, with the help of the ACCC and its newly-created Fisheries Affinity Group, 15 colleges from five different provinces to meet with them in Ottawa to discuss their role in the national effort. Divided by most of the Canadian landmass, these

college representatives had never met their colleagues from the other coast, and rarely, if at all, those located within their own respective coastal regions.

At these meetings the colleges heard from fish harvesters that there were significant fears about how difficult and costly a Prior-Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process would be that recognizes their competencies, and that they felt that there were too few fish harvesters employed by some colleges to teach them. The result was a sense of alienation that somewhat prevented them from pursuing lifelong learning at colleges. Colleges then exchanged amongst themselves best practices and experiences regarding these legitimate fears and how one college had successfully met those challenges. A crucial understanding of the concrete realities and feelings of the client and of each other happened at that meeting facilitating further progress on a national scale. The bond of the common value of recognition of all learning and of using those who know the profession best to teach was gradually shaped.

Subsequent meetings have led to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) of Common Action between the ACCC and the CCPFH, as well as an MOU between BC colleges and the BC Association of Fish Harvesters to work together on joint core curriculum, a streamlined Recognition of Learning process and the training-of-trainers. As one participant shared:

> *"It is due to the affinity group and national meetings that we are now participating with other colleges and councils in the development of a common commercial fisheries program curriculum."*

In concluding this section, it can be argued that the very vastness and regional distinctiveness which are so much a part of the Canadian reality mean that building the requisite trust beyond our institutional and provincial boundaries will require regular face-to-face meetings complemented by technology-mediated communications in between meetings. It is also at those meetings that a dialogue on common values and priorities can truly happen and that a network can become consolidated. The major obstacle identified by respondents to holding these meetings is securing enough funding to ensure that more remote and lesser-funded colleges are not prevented from attending and reaping the results.

5.4 A Vibrant Network Requires Ongoing Dialogue on Roles, Objectives and Priorities

From the experience of numerous network groups and the comments of a majority of respondents, it becomes clear that to be effective nationally requires the affinity group to clarify its roles, objectives and priority actions.

There is a clear desire to have an identified and enthusiastic group moderator or facilitator to help stimulate discussion online and to prepare for national meetings. Some non-active group participants are clearly very frustrated by the lack of such a moderator in their group, but excuse themselves from playing that role due to lack of time. Others feel that selecting an actual coordinating committee or executive, which takes on responsibilities and reports back to the membership at biannual meetings, was the key step that moved them to becoming more effective. A number feel that only with a part-time paid executive-director or secretary will the group be able to attain its full potential, while a few warned against becoming too organized or formal and killing the value of the informality. Still others suggest that larger groups will become effective if they can occasionally work together as sub-groups on specific topics so that e-mails are not clogged with exchanges that are not of relevance to the rest of the group.

The common denominator is that there is a desire to transform informal information exchange networks into more active affinity groups once the group, or at least an active core of the group, has agreed that there is a common, important national agenda for them to deal with. In my estimate, Wenger's notion of "Community of Practice" is a useful concept at this point.

Wenger's definition of such a community focuses more on the generic professional practice which individual members of the community each have which allows them to exchange productively in an ongoing manner and to encourage innovation in their domain of interest often within one corporation. The use of the term "community of practice" in our case would have that initial connotation but would also include the common practice at the national level, which a network decides to take on in a more organized and yet still generally informal manner.

This would allow us to distinguish between a developing community of practice, such as the one for vice-presidents, and an actual registered organization such as the Canadian Association of Motive Power Educators (CAMPE), which has a formal executive, a paid executive-director and national projects it undertakes and reports on to funders. Both types are also distinct from some affinity groups that are informal networks of information exchange. We shall come back to these distinctions in our conclusion.

Whatever the nature of the network, the list of specific recommendations contained in the Questionnaire Results are a testimony to the practical nature of college participants in affinity groups. They want the groups to be more organized, more regularly corresponding, more practical, more effective and more responsive to what the members feel are the priorities.

The history of one of the most organized of affinity groups is rich in lessons in this regard. CAMPE was set up in the early nineties to better respond to the training needs of the important automotive industry. A number of large employers in the sector had voiced concerns in a sector study, according to one of the CAMPE founders, *"that colleges were not responsive enough to industry's needs. The industry did not want to have to deal with all colleges involved in automotive training individually."*

CAMPE included about eight colleges at the beginning and has grown to 23 colleges and two Centres de Formation Professionelle, in Québec, who have organized to meet the common challenge outlined above. It has an executive of five members, two annual full membership meetings and two executive meetings at other times. It recently hired a part-time executive-director marketer, by raising group membership fees, because it felt it needed that level of organization to carry out its mandate. More recently it expanded to include the aviation, rail, bus and truck sub-sectors, setting up CAMPE committees for each of those transportation sub-sectors. It has also won two small national contracts in the energy efficiency field that will generate some much-needed revenues.

The case study on CAMPE and its relationship with the Canadian Automotive Repair and Service Council (CARS), which was produced by one writer from each organization and published by ACCC, illustrates the numerous accomplishments which can be achieved by such an organization, and the hard lessons learned along the way. These include: the setting of national training standards and an accreditation process of college programs by industry; the generation of added revenues and large industry donations to colleges; and, the "most important" accomplishment of establishing:

> "an information conduit enabling the automobile industry and the education sector to work together to develop and implement feasible solutions to the technical and labour market challenges."[3]

And yet for all its successes, some find the informal exchanges of experiences and practices to be the most rewarding part of their membership. They complain that *"there are too many provincial*

jurisdictions to have common solutions," while others say that the group is still not business-like enough to survive: *"CAMPE must decide if it is just a network of old boys sharing war stories or an entrepreneurial group that responds to industry's needs."*

They are also still struggling with how to fund their meetings and activities with smaller colleges, and saying that the price is getting too steep.

Tensions over what should be the primary role for such groups may continue even after they have become more organized. Perhaps this reflects the continuing diversity of expectations and needs which differing colleges and representatives bring to the table. The overarching issue is that for such national networks or groups, agreement on what are the common priorities for whom and how best to organize to meet them as a group requires an ongoing dialogue that should not be avoided and should be revisited regularly.

The bottom line for very practically focused and overworked college staff is that the network must be providing real added value to its participants, whatever that is at various times and stages of its existence, for it to survive and flourish. To do so, all agree that there needs to be a good level of agreement on values, objectives, organizational roles and priorities:

> *"We have to define the key hot issues of the day for the network to be relevant to most. It has to have a positive impact on one's college, their programs and their students ultimately to be worth the investment of precious time...setting up a coordinating committee and defining clear but rotating roles is key."*

5.5 Working Productively with National Sector Councils and Sectoral Initiatives

The main set of unexpected benefits derived from participation in an affinity group was clearly felt to be access to labour market information, core competencies, training modules and other career information products produced or distributed by the relevant national sectoral council or initiative. In some cases, the opportunity to meet with the council on a national basis was also a benefit.

Although a few networks of colleges in automotive or steel had been collaborating with their counterpart sectoral council for quite some time, most of the councils did not have an equivalent coordinated body of colleges who were providing the education and training in their domain. This was the case for many of those created more recently under a federal government initiative to promote the creation of sectoral councils in more sectors.[9]

Sectoral councils are primarily concerned with the state of the human resources in their sector and most sectors hire a majority of new employees from colleges and often use these institutions' continuing education departments for upgrading of existing staff. It therefore made sense to the sector councils to have a counterpart body encompassing all college departments providing training for their sector. As the CEO of one sector council said publicly at that time:

> *"If we have to continue to try to deal with 13 different provincial systems and 60 different individual colleges to work on a national program, then we will be tempted to do the training ourselves or to go to one or two national private college networks instead to save our precious time."*

The survey questionnaire and interviews conducted with the organized affinity groups reveal that interacting with sector councils and sectoral initiatives is a role that most feel to be an important one for their group. This interaction is highly appreciated for its added value to curriculum validation and adjustment and its contribution to keeping everyone up to date on where the sector is heading

human resources wise (employment trends, new jobs, new skills required, etc.). It is also valued for correlating one's provincial course content to national standards and expectations, and for the new training business that it has occasionally brought to colleges.

This type of interaction also served to increase the commitment towards, and actual integration of, essential employability skills into technical curriculum. Most sectoral studies now indicate that those skills are in most demand and the weakest among existing employees and recent graduates.

In summary, participants felt that their affinity group interacting with sector councils provided them with a *"broader national perspective on labour trends and occupational standards informing curriculum"*:

> *"We use this information extensively as part of the needs assessment process for particular sectors. It has been very useful if not essential."*
>
> *"The information often validates local or provincial trends. Often it provides part of the rationale for changes/evolution to our programs and services and how we deliver our programs."*
>
> *"We've picked up the Information Technology Professional (ITP) Program from the Software Human Resource Council and are starting to have some success in offering it locally."*
>
> *"The national labour market information helped indicate to us that we needed to shift from the highly technical forestry training we have been doing to much broader training under the umbrella title of Environmental Studies."*

In the previous section we saw the impressive results achieved by the collaboration between the automotive sector and its equivalent college network of providers under CAMPE. In this section we will examine the steel sector as it has one of the oldest sector councils and has had a number of years of joint work with colleges to study. The Canadian Steel Trade and Employment Congress (CSTEC) is the name of the council and the Steel Affinity Group is made up of 15 colleges from across Canada. A jointly written case study commissioned by the ACCC, entitled "How to collaborate through the ups and downs in our economy," deals with the history and lessons from their joint collaboration.[10]

The study talks about the need to have both "a common goal and challenge" as well as the WIIFMs (what's in it for me?) for both the industry and colleges in order to make the partnership work. Interestingly, they provide the example of the period when there was a serious downturn in the steel industry and thousands of steelworkers had to be prepared for employment in other sectors. The CSTEC and the colleges collaborated to develop specific HRDC-funded retraining programs for these workers, which allowed the industry and unions to create a smoother transition and, "little by little, the college/cégep system became the primary provider of training for laid-off workers."

Based on their experiences together, the CSTEC and colleges have entered into a national articulation agreement and an accreditation program to facilitate mobility and recognition of learning and to guarantee consistent quality of training across Canada. They have also collaborated on international technical assistance contracts in Chile, Cuba, Egypt and Brazil.

But according to the study these were not achieved without facing a number of challenges. For example, "there were limited linkages among the colleges/cégeps themselves. When CSTEC first attempted to bring the colleges/cégeps together, it didn't know where to begin", and "neither side

understood the other's issues" to name but two challenges.[11] The need to have the participating colleges form some kind of network group was evident, as was the necessity to create a common platform to engage in regular dialogue and joint planning on how to better meet the human resource or labour manpower challenges of this sector. Even today the authors agree that one of the difficulties that still needs addressing is "...the need to talk to each other more frequently and establish closer, more durable relationships."[12]

In addition, each side of the partnership must truly recognize and respect the other partner's "core competencies."[13] The council of employers/employees can identify what the competencies required by the industry are at this point in time and who should monitor and accredit the college programs against national standards. College faculty can best translate those requirements into lively and relevant curricula and programs. Should the councils start to get into the development and distribution of training modules or services on their own, or if the colleges arrive at the table with predesigned course offerings not adapted to a changing reality, that trust will be broken and the partnership will be on shaky ground.

Recent sectoral initiatives in the mining, nursing and voluntary sectors mirror these lessons and the requirements for finding better ways for employers/employees and colleges to work at the national level to ensure relevancy, recognition of learning, and mobility and accessibility to learning in Canada's publicly-funded post-secondary educational institutions. These lessons are felt to apply not only to traditional industrial sectors but equally to the human services sectors.

Some respondents fear that colleges will thus be heading towards uniform curricula that will mean a loss of local responsiveness and provincial control, and would negate the richness that comes from the very diversity of responses, as we have seen earlier. Others indicated that it is possible to act in cooperation with sector councils nationally without losing their uniqueness and diversity. We shall examine this important conundrum in the concluding remarks.

In summary, the affinity groups are felt to have a definite and crucial role to play in interacting in an ongoing manner with their corresponding national associations or councils of employers/employees in the rapidly changing education and training requirements of each sector.

5.6 The Role of Technology in Support of Group Objectives

The underlying premise when the Internet-based networks or "affinity groups" were set up by ACCC three years ago was that the new technologies would allow the creation of many new national affinity networks that would develop like those of the automotive or steel sectors. In fact this has not proven to be the case.

Setting up an Internet-based network group has not automatically led to a dynamic interchange and sharing of resources. The main complaint or unmet expectation of respondents was the lack of "traffic," lack of exchanges, or of networking within their virtual group. Three respondents wondered if the group was actually still in existence and one had forgotten that he was part of such a group, which is an indication of how much of an impression it had made to their daily working lives. The listserves helped to transmit valuable information from ACCC to most participants but did not automatically become true multi-directional communication channels.

An active participant in the tourism network explained it succinctly in this manner:

> *"The intensely provincial (in both senses of the word) nature of post-secondary college education in Canada mitigates against 'electronic bonding' amongst academics - anything that facilitates face-to-face exchanges is beneficial."*

In fact, the same could be said for non-academics as we saw in the literature. An active, vibrant network requires informal leaders or moderators willing to initiate and stimulate discussions at the beginning. It also requires some face-to-face meetings of at least a significant minority of active participants and some overall agreement on group priority issues and objectives that are best arrived at in person. The technology allows us to more easily follow-up in between meetings and more broadly share important information than the fax did. It remains a useful, supportive but non-determining factor in the development of a lively network group.

The National Council of Deans of Technology (NCDOT), which brings together deans who must keep abreast of technological changes as part of their jobs, is one example of how a network uses technology to support, but not create, the social dynamic and life of an effective network. Created about a decade ago to facilitate exchanges amongst deans of technology, NCDOT started to use its own listserve well before the ACCC listserves were created, but the prime mode of exchange occurred during meetings themselves, which happened twice a year in different parts of the country. The elected volunteer chairperson, aided later by the executive assistant of another dean who became secretary to the group, were the persons who most animated the listserve with meeting minutes, proposed agendas and queries on which topics should be a priority for the next meeting.

In the past couple of years, NCDOT has included specific roundtables within their meetings. These roundtables address such common hot issues as the relevancy of how we teach the technologies, how to attract and retain more young Canadians, particularly young women, to study in the sciences and technological disciplines, and the requirements of applied degrees and its effect on faculty. The listserve is now being used by more participants to research some of these issues, prepare the sessions and remind others of follow-up tasks they agreed to take on. Its use has evolved in synchronization with the needs of the group itself.

The more recently recruited deans of NCDOT are pushing for more learning at meetings and more follow-up in between meetings on national issues of advocacy or applied research. They would like ACCC, the chairperson and executive to be more proactive in seeking funding to implement relevant national initiatives, such as media promotion of technological careers, or other national partners in business and government to work with on common national issues. Those challenges will likely require greater use of technology in support of these new commonly determined group priorities.

The selection of technologies that are appropriate to the nature, the existing dynamic and priorities of each specific group is an important issue. For example, a number of respondents suggested that their group now needs to have a common place to work on joint documents, store previous messages and resources shared, while at the same time avoiding e-mail overload. Therefore, ACCC should perhaps be looking at the adoption of web-based platforms instead of solely traditional e-mail listserve technology to support the needs of those groups who are at the stage of working more as a "community of practice." Such technology should also make it simpler technically to set up and work as a temporary sub-group on specific themes within larger affinity groups who need to work in smaller sub-committees to remain relevant.

5.7 The Crucial Role of Informal Leaders in Affinity Groups

As we have seen, access to a listserve does not a network make. Based on the experiences of existing and effective groups, the role of leadership has been crucial in that process. In almost all cases, the transformation of an emerging network into a more organized network or community of practice has been the result of leadership from one or two committed individuals or a coordinating committee. But what kind of leadership are we talking about?

We saw in the literature that such leadership is informal and requires certain kinds of specific competencies that could be summarized as facilitative rather than authoritative.[14] From the interviews with nine respondents who objectively play such an informal leadership role, certain common traits emerge. They are all motivated by some deeply held values or objectives, which they feel are crucial to the learners and faculty of all colleges. Some of these values or objectives were greater accessibility, quality training or mobility for all learners, better employability skills training for needy learners, and placing professional development and human resources issues more prominently on the agendas of colleges. All were deeply held and rapidly enunciated by the individuals in question.

But these leaders also have the initiative to send out the first messages to others, to call a first face-to-face meeting of an interested group across provincial boundaries and to often cover the initial costs of the group's activities within their own college budget. But why bother to act nationally when you could more simply work to improve your own college?

Based on the interviews, I propose that such leaders have concluded that they must be continuously learning themselves to be fully effective at their own jobs. And, that it will be of significant value to their own colleges to exchange more with colleagues across the country, and that there is something of overarching value to all colleges and all learners which needs to be done collaboratively at the national level. When these motivations are present they have stimulated a network group to become more organized or systematic, as is the case with the NCDOT, CAMPE or, more recently, with the vice-presidents' network. When such informal leaders have not come forward, the affinity groups have not come alive, have featured very low traffic which participants complain about, or have remained at the still useful level of exchanging some experiences and resources electronically and at occasional meetings.

The degree of consciousness on the part of the informal leaders regarding the need to act on the national and international playing fields determines the rate at which an information exchange network transforms itself into a national community of practice or not. But even in those cases, there may still be debates among participants on whether the group should act nationally on common issues or should remain as a very useful, more informal information and resource exchange network. This is a debate that is currently going on in three affinity groups.

It would appear that there is a growing trend for somewhat younger or newer informal leaders starting to take part in the groups to be much more interested in the possibility of taking some common action on advocacy and partnership issues at the national level. As one interviewee explained:

> *"There is a sense that the older college leaders are happy that we have come this far as a network, whereas many of us newer arrivals look at where we could be and how much more present we need to be nationally."*

There is a feeling on the part of some that more rotation of leadership roles has to occur, with new faces being encouraged to emerge and take the leadership from the veterans. There are also complaints voiced that some of the more organized groups become too conservative and not diverse enough in their membership, leadership and vision. As one participant put it:

> *"The way we organize ourselves is less like a movement to provide Canadians with broad access to quality education and more like a traditional, orthodox institution. We need to re-become innovators and challengers."*

Whatever role an affinity group decides to take on, the informal leaders need to listen very closely to the changing and diverse interests of the group's membership. Some suggested using regular surveys to determine what the burning issues are to ensure ongoing relevancy, the creation of sub-

groups on particular issues should stay smaller to remain relevant, and to spread the leadership responsibilities to a broader group of people. If the leadership fails to listen, members simply drop out or no longer attend.

Such leaders also need to know how to facilitate participatory dialogue processes with many different participants. There is no vertical authority structure to decide things in the end so being able to arrive at consensus based on fruitful dialogue, without grinding down into indecision and inactivity, is a crucial skill which is not given to or acquired by all.

Another informal leadership competency useful to highlight is that of being able to represent such a network group at the national level. With no official representation structure usually, the representative must be willing to operate in a very open and consultative manner, advising participants of the issues to be discussed beforehand and reporting back to all members after such meetings so that all are benefitting from the individual's presence. Some have complained that representing the affinity group ends up solely benefiting the individual and his/her college.

With such added responsibilities and no real free time at their regular jobs, the informal leaders must be able to see concrete added value from their contributions. The opportunity to meet and learn from new colleagues, to make a difference nationally and to operate in a more open context free from bureaucracy seem to be some of the most appreciated benefits. As proposed by Westley in her article, this kind of context may be one that best corresponds to this type of leader anyway:

> "maybe it is not only the form (a network) that makes them effective, but also that the form provides a better vehicle than does hierarchy for a growing and highly effective part of the population."[15]

Identifying a few key informal leaders for a proposed affinity group would appear to be one of the most important tasks that a convener or national secretariat staff can accomplish.

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1 Allied Health includes the non-nursing programs in the various medical technologies. See the brochure at www.health.bcit.ca/caahp.

2 See the full text of the brief, "The Importance of Allied Health Training Programs on the Future of Health Care in Canada" at www.health.bcit.ca/caahp.

3 For more information on the recent Ontario College Applied Degree initiative visit www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/nr/02.03/bg0327.html

4 For more information on these Technology Transfer Centres, visit their common website at www.reseautranstech.qc.ca.

5 See article by Fred Bird, Professor of Religion and Ethics at Concordia University, "The Moral Muteness of Managers" (Regents of the University of California, 1989).

6 For more information on Essential Employability Skills, refer to the HRDC website on Essential Skills at www15.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/english/es.asp, or the Conference Board of Canada website on Employability Skills at www.conferenceboard.ca/education/pdf/esp2000.pdf.

7 See the CCPFH website for more information on their national professionalization efforts at www.ccpfh-ccpp.org/eng/faccueil.html.

8 CAMPS-CARS-LMG, "How Can 29 Colleges, Institutes and School Boards Collaborate Nationally?" (ACCC, 2001) at ftp://www.accc.ca/pubs/studies/CAMPE.pdf.

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[9] There are currently 26 sector councils, five in the process of being created and at least 10 other sectoral initiatives that may not create formal councils but undertake similar national human resources initiatives. For the list of councils and examples of their activities and products, please see The Alliance of Sector Councils (TASC) web site at www.councils.org.

[10] George Nakitsas and Francine Bergeron, "How to Collaborate Through the Ups and Downs in our Economy" (ACCC, 2001), at ftp://www.accc.ca/pubs/studies/Steel.pdf.

[11] Ibid., p.11.

[12] Ibid., p.20.

[13] C.K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel, "The Core Competence of the Corporation," Harvard Business Review (May-June 1990), pp. 79-90.

[14] Margaret J. Wheatley, Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World (McGraw-Hill, 1999) and Frances Westley, "Not on our Watch – The Biodiversity Crisis Global Collaboration Response," Organizational Dimensions of Global Change – No Limits to Cooperation, David Cooperrider and Jane E. Dutton, editors (Sage Publications, 1999).

[15] Westley, p.113.

6.0 REFLECTIONS ON ADDED VALUE AT DIFFERING LEVELS

Both the empirical study of affinity group participants and many of the authors discussed in this paper[1] present lists of concrete recommendations regarding how to improve the functioning of network groups which are very useful to examine and evaluate in terms of their relevance to one's own group. The purpose of this conclusion will be to step back from these specific recommendations in order to analyze the added value of such affinity groups for the individual, the network itself, their institution, their national association, the country in which they are located and for nascent international affinity networks.

In our current epoch, the **individual** is faced with the daily challenge of keeping up to date and being selective amidst growing mountains of information which come at him/her from all media and especially the electronic ones. Without keeping up to date in a knowledge-based society and economy, the person and his employer risk missing out on a new trend, a new opportunity or a new idea which could increase the satisfaction of their students or reduce costs. And yet to keep up to date with everything is not possible. One reaches a point of saturation and overload that becomes counterproductive.[2]

We have seen throughout this paper that effective affinity groups, or network groups of whatever name, can play a valuable role in providing individuals with information that is commented and contextualized by respected peers so that it can be more rapidly turned into useful knowledge for one's own practice. It is a mechanism to accelerate learning and especially applicable learning.

One could posit that just as guilds and unions were organizational forms which grew to protect exploited workers in the industrial age, perhaps well-functioning affinity groups are one of the organizational forms which have arisen to protect the information age professional from information overload and burnout. As Westley has argued, the community of peers provides an informal and yet very powerful reference group for growing numbers of professionals.

We have also seen that there is a growing demand placed on individuals to become ever more innovative in terms of meeting, for example, the often conflicting demands of greater access to quality learning with fewer dollars or the more rapid adaptation of technology by organizations in order to remain competitive. The quiet time of reflection and the ability to play around with competing ideas and frameworks, which give rise to innovation, is in very short supply these days. It would appear from the studies that network groupings can provide a nurturing environment for peers meeting away from the office or the classroom which facilitates the debate of diverse ideas which can then engender the creative or innovative process.

Learned societies of university faculty and researchers have long played such a role and we have seen how large corporations are now employing "communities of practice" to that effect. It is perhaps time to create and make use of something analogous within the college and other not-for-profit or community sectors. As one affinity group participant explained, she wants to be able to "*...to access the brain power of individuals across Canada to assist in problem solving.*" Otherwise we may run the risk of becoming like gnomes, condemned to work in isolated cubicles reinventing the wheel at least 13 different times while the rest of the world goes by.

The added value which comes to the **network** from starting to act more as a "community of practice" on the provincial or national stages can be summarized as that of acquiring a voice and a say in the provincial and national decisions which affect one's particular discipline or domain. Provincial and national policies or initiatives do not only affect one's institution in general, but also affects one's own

department and discipline in very particular ways. To act only at the general institutional level would be limiting oneself to one avenue of influence and joint action, rather than being able to advocate not only for colleges, but for the market value of college business programs or for the importance of home-care worker training to serious health reform.

It is true that not all networks want to become active at the national level, and it is here that the distinctions Wenger and Seely Brown make may be useful in helping affinity groups define what exactly they want to be as a group. I would propose from the experience of close to 50 such **affinity groups** that there are generally three levels of activity useful to distinguish:

1. Some affinity groups act as **networks of information exchange** mainly, facilitating individuals to circulate information and ask questions of other members;

2. Some affinity groups decide to also act as **communities of practice** to develop a common list of national initiatives and positions they advocate for, but do so informally;

3. Some affinity groups decide to transform themselves into **formal associations of peers** in specific sectors, with membership fees, executive elections and fiscal accountabilities.

There is no magic rule that says one form is better than the other. But, the experiences we have reviewed do teach us that each group must regularly discuss which of these roles it wants to take on, and whether it is organized in such a manner as to do so effectively.

The crucial role of informal leaders in the development of affinity groups, and in the collective determination of which level they should operate, at has been examined in this study. However, it warrants more research on the specific competencies required for such new types of leadership roles. One of the most interesting competencies mentioned for participants and informal leaders is being able to find ways for the group "to think together" in creative ways, while celebrating and maintaining the diversity of views that are so essential to creativity and competitiveness.

For the **formal institutions** where affinity group participants work, the active involvement of their employees in knowledge networks of peers should be seen as a valued complement to their official roles and positions. As we have seen, it can keep employees informed, current, learning continuously, innovative and supported socially in times of great change. If we refer back to Seely Brown's new Law for the Knowledge Society which states that "the more people you have who can learn more in a shorter time, the more competitive you will be," and add Terry O'Banion's advice for all colleges to become truly "learning colleges of the 21st century," then the contribution of affinity groups to a learning culture in general and to concrete cost-saving and learner-centered innovations cannot be neglected.

As the Australian study recommended, the challenge for formal institutions is to concretely support staff members involved in such network groups and to find ways of more efficiently applying the relevant ideas generated to their specific institutional reality. For example, the college network in the Australian state of Tasmania now allots a budget each year to allow its deans or faculty to attend national affinity meetings and encourages them to report back to their institutions on the innovations elsewhere which might be applied in Tasmania.

The **national associations** of colleges, or whatever membership constituency is concerned, are also challenged to function in new ways which encourage the creation and sustaining of effective knowledge or affinity networks. This means, in part, moving away from a project implementation

ethos some are involved in to a clear member-service focus where the added value is the national perspective, the national advocacy, the national knowledge edge which the association brings to each of its members. The ACCC took this path overtly over the past four years, under the leadership of its new CEO, and is what led to the assigning of secretariat resources in the creation and support of the numerous affinity groups now in existence.

And yet what we have also seen in this study is that creating a group with a listserve does not automatically lead to a functional network or community of practice. That process is a social one which starts to happen when emerging informal leaders are identified, when the group finds the resources to meet face-to-face to work out its priority values and objectives, and when the group "starts to think together."

In light of this finding, and reflecting upon the last three years of activity, too much energy was placed on the creation of affinity groups and the recruitment of large numbers of participants. Not enough energy was spent on the identification of informal group leaders or on facilitating the organization of coordination committees and the groups in national meetings to allow the group dynamic to begin in earnest. Too much focus was placed on the identification and distribution of information from the secretariat to the group participants without an equal amount of energy being placed on developing the community which could more effectively act upon that information and turn it into useful knowledge.

All the studies do point to the important role of national associations in publicizing and convening groups together for the first time. They also point to the essential role of associations in providing these groups with the technical, financial and logistical means to become functional and providing ongoing knowledge support by linking them up to useful knowledge from other similar affinity groups and national partners. These are roles that the ACCC did take on with visible results in some sectors, as we have seen in this study.

It should also be noted that affinity groups or networks are a powerful new tool for national associations in reaching out to their membership directly beyond the much smaller number of activists present on national boards and committees. A number of respondents to the questionnaire noted that they were, for the very first time, aware of what their national association was doing for them and capable of getting more involved if they so desired. Affinity groups could therefore be seen as one of the new channels for the further democratization of knowledge and of membership-based associations in large or diverse countries.

In terms of better tapping the knowledge of those groups, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), for example, has six elected representatives from their major affinity groups, called "affiliated councils," who sit on their national board as advisors to the association. This is one way of bringing the valuable wisdom of such knowledge groups more into the mainstream association governance.[3]

At the **national** level, we have seen in Australia and in Canada how affinity groups or communities of practice can be effective new vehicles for engaging in national sectoral labour market or human resource initiatives at a time when countries are searching for new ways to significantly increase relevant skills and learning for their populations and to stimulate greater amounts of innovation in all sectors. The examples cited of significant achievements in the automotive and steel sectors illustrate the enormous potential of national networks of employers/employees working in close collaboration and partnership with networks of college faculty teaching and training for those sectors. And yet there remains some reticence or fear that such national action will lead to a reduction of all curricula to the lowest common denominator and a loss of diversity and local/provincial control.

A new concept of "minimum specifications" for dealing with complex realities which was examined during the McGill-McConnell program may be of some use here.[4] In our context, it would seem to be more appropriate to use the term "essential specifications" to denote the essential components, or specifications, which are needed to act, but which then allow the maximum amount of flexibility and diversity in implementation.

In the case of the complex reality we are presently concerned with, at the national level the essential specifications are the common core competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that are defined by employers and employees in any sector as being essential and common wherever one works across Canada. In addition to those, there will be a variance of between 10 percent to 50 percent in competencies from one locality or province to the next depending on the sector and may even be regulated provincially. Finally, there should be the distinctive pedagogy, which each institution and faculty member brings to the transmission of that set of skills, knowledge and attitudes and should remain rich and diverse. The challenge is in learning to operate at differing levels at the same time and determining of is essential, truly value-added and hence best done at each level of our activity.

One can further posit that the very decentralization of our federal system provides us with the best of both worlds, if we are wise. Canadian decentralization has ensured local control and relevancy, but the national and international levels of activity, and the requirements for consistency of quality and recognition of learning, are upon us for good. As one college administrator quipped, "*the community part of the college has now expanded to include the national and even the international community.*"

Rather than having a federal ministry of education or labour imposing national norms, as is the case in most countries, the Canadian government has undertaken to support sector-led and sector-managed human resources initiatives. These have shown already to have the potential to become very responsive, rapid and collaborative mechanisms for effective labour market adjustment that ultimately greatly benefits the individual learner trying to figure out what to study.

Sector councils and colleges should therefore **not** set their sights on national curriculum and the standardization of everything, but rather agree to common essential core competencies and standards, while encouraging the diversity that makes us so vibrant. In this manner we might even be able to talk about national initiatives in the Canadian education and training domain without unleashing a political crisis in answer to our initial "wicked question." This approach has the added value of freeing up staff time from what is standard for the more challenging tasks of adapting creatively to new trends, as one affinity group participant wisely observed.

Such national sectoral initiatives and partnerships, as we have seen in the Gallagher and Dennison studies, conclude that they are now essential if colleges wish to meet the needs of their more mobile learners. Such collaborations are the national equivalent and complement to the local Program Advisory Committee[5] or provincial joint manpower committees.

The affinity groups can provide a new organizational form which acts as the natural counterpart to national employer/employee sectoral councils to ensure a much quicker and effective adjustment of what is being taught to what is required from the learner in the ever-changing work world. With the appropriate use of the Internet by sector councils to conduct rapid surveys of employers, and quick distribution of the findings to colleges across the country, we are perhaps starting to have a labour market information mechanism that corresponds more adequately to the speed of change we constantly face.

Internationally, as Westley's study has shown, affinity networks or groups also have significant potential to innovate and act effectively on certain common international challenges. With the exist-

ence of international federations or unions of various associations, including the recently created World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics, it would be worth exploring the use of international affinity groups on a few specific and very focused issues of common concern to see if they can provide both effective channels for the sharing of inspiring practices and the undertaking of some common action. With both the Australian and the British technical and vocational systems experimenting with sectoral councils and communities of practice,[6] there is some common language and initial groups to begin working with. Perhaps there are experiences from other international federations that could also be referenced regarding their use of international affinity or network groups.

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1 See Wenger's seven principles in Chapter 3 of Nurturing Communities of Practice, McDermott's 10 critical success factors table reprinted in The Potential for Communities of Practice to Underpin the National Training Framework in Australia, and Chapters 10, 11 and 12 of the same Australian study by John Mitchell.

2 Kenneth J. Gergen, The Saturated Self – Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life, (Basic Books, 2000).

3 For more information on the AACC Board governance and Affiliated Councils activity, visit the AACC web site at www.aacc.nche.edu/Template.cfm?Section=AboutAACC.

4 Brenda Zimmerman with Curt Lindberg and Paul Plsek, Edgeware: Insights from Complexity Science for Health Care Leaders (VHA Press, 1998).

5 Each college program is required to have a Program Advisory Committee made up of local employers of their graduates. Twice a year, the Committee examines the relevancy of the curriculum and makes recommendations for adjustments and new program offerings.

6 For the British reference to their new sectoral skills councils initiative and its Canadian connections, see TASC Connections, Vol. 2 No. 2, p.3 at www.councils.org/newsroom/connections/connectionsmenu_e.cfm.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Faced with a rapidly evolving, more interconnected and complex reality, we have seen that colleges can benefit from the use of national affinity groups to exchange inspiring practices and useful resources or tips amongst colleagues across the country, to keep up to date on national labour market and human resources trends in their discipline, and to influence national policy and practice on issues of common concern. National affinity groups can allow participants to learn rapidly and remain innovative and relevant in their response to the varying needs of Canadian learners.

However, it is also clear from this study that we need to learn and experiment more with how to make such affinity groups or communities of practice more effective in fully realizing their potential. The following are the conclusions and recommendations to that effect emanating from the survey of current participants and informal leaders undertaken in this study:

7.1 Use a Facilitative Mode of Leadership

Affinity groups cannot avoid the issue and challenge of finding the right kind of leadership that corresponds to the organizational format of the network they have created. This often means identifying a facilitator or moderator, and perhaps even a coordinating committee, to move things forward, even if they are still functioning in an informal mode. Those roles may, and probably should, rotate regularly but there needs to be some level of moderation, encouragement and minimal organization for the group to attain its full potential. The challenge is to select and nurture a facilitative type of moderation and an informal style of leadership, avoiding traditional definitions and roles of positional or formal leadership. It would be best to openly discuss the type of leadership or facilitation that is required by each group to avoid those pitfalls.

7.2 Ensure Funding for Secretariat Support

While maintaining an informal organizational format, participants feel that there needs to be some form of ongoing secretariat support, be it financial or volunteer. Ironically, participants feel that in light of the paucity of time and resources everyone faces, the network must not place huge time and resource demands upon them in order to remain valuable and worth belonging to. This does not mean that they are not ready to contribute freely of their time and resources. Rather, they do not want to spend those rare resources in sustaining roles of the secretariat, whether maintaining the group's listserve or website, providing some fixed reference point to query at any point in time, or initiating and preparing face-to-face meetings and national initiatives with counterpart national sectoral councils. Such a support role means finding ongoing sources of financing to pay for such roles or those dedicated volunteers willing to assume such support roles. The major challenge is to avoid having the secretariat become a quasi-executive for the group, but rather to keep its focus on facilitating the network itself to become more inclusive, more active, more connected and more effective;

7.3 Clarify the Group's Objectives and Value-added Priorities

Even though affinity groups are fundamentally iterative modes of organization, they still need a clear elucidation on what their fundamental objective is as a group (are they a network, a community of practice or an incipient formal organization?) and what their current priorities should be. This may seem contradictory at first, but participants affirm that in a world of info-saturation and resource cutbacks they need to be reassured that if they are investing their precious time it will be for returns which are priorities for them and their organization. Better interacting with national sectoral councils and initiatives seems to be one of the major motivating external factors of interest to many. Ultimately, everyone knows that anyone can opt out of the network at any point in time if he/she is no

longer satisfied or motivated. Therefore, keeping the network together depends not on any organizational, financial or psychological imperative, but rather on the network meeting the needs of individual participants at any point in time. Affinity groups should therefore ensure that they undertake a full and periodic dialogue on their objectives and added value to participants in order to remain relevant.

7.4 Ensure Regular Face-to-face Meetings

Occasional face-to-face meetings of participants, whether they are regional sub-groupings or national meetings with a good number of participants present, are seen to be essential to the transformation of a loose network of information exchange into a more valuable knowledge network or community of practice. In almost all cases when groups have managed to meet face-to-face, they go on to become more relevant and lively in their functioning. The technology of the virtual seems to require the touch of physical presence and interaction in order to be used to its fullest in the intervening time periods. The ongoing challenge in a country like Canada, or in an international context, is how participants from far-flung places can access the resources needed for such necessary occasional meetings. This is especially true for those coming from more remote regions or smaller organizations. Special measures need to be considered to avoid the concentration of informal power and relevance in major cities or larger institutions.

7.5 Be Conscious of the Language and Cultural Obstacles for Full Inclusion

In the particular bilingual and bicultural Canadian situation there are additional challenges and sensitivities to be dealt with if one truly wants to have a national affinity group and dialogue. Having to function entirely in English or always using interpretation machines is a serious impediment to the full participation of Canadians who speak French as their main, and perhaps only, language. A policy of encouraging participants to post messages in their mother tongue and then calling upon the recipients to use their high-school French or English, with the help of a dictionary, to decipher the message was adopted and agreed to, but has not really been used by any group. Francophone participants surveyed felt that because constant translation was not realistic for a more informal network, it was necessary to identify bilingual francophones who could act as bridges between the mainly English-speaking network and the equivalent French-speaking network, if such exists, as often is the case. In addition, the particular high-touch and mainly oral cultures of our aboriginal founding nations also need to be taken into account for such networks to become truly national. The size of the survey did not allow us to elaborate recommendations on this important issue, but it needs to be explored, especially as an ACCC Aboriginal Affinity Group is just getting going.

7.6 Make the Existence and Roles of Affinity Groups Known to College Presidents and Vice-Presidents

To fully bring the creativity and innovation which can emanate from affinity groups into play, the formal leadership of the home institutions to which the network participants belong needs to be made aware of the value of such groups for the their own colleges and for the national college movement. As the literature has shown, networks are not the best vehicles for implementation of new policies and programs. They can rapidly invent and articulate such policies and programs, but the concrete implementation of any new initiative or significant change remains in the hands of local formal institutions and governance structures. If the formal leadership - college board chairs, presidents and vice-presidents - are not aware of the existence of affinity groups, nor of their significant potential contributions to innovation, change, knowledge transfer and interaction with national associations of employers/employees, then much of the creativity of such network groups may encounter solid walls of resistance. Participants therefore recommended that the existence and value of affinity

groups for colleges, and the college movement in general, needed to be more clearly articulated and discussed by the ACCC Board, as well as with college presidents and vice-presidents.

7.7 Use Technological Support Adapted to the Needs of Groups to "Think Together"

In terms of technological support, whereas the ubiquitous e-mail-based listserves of network participants are definite requisites for networks of participants spread across Canada, or the world, they are by no means the ultimate technological support tools required. Participants would like the ACCC to move towards a Web-based platform, within which a group could have access to its own internal Web site for posting, downloading and working together on common documents, and through which the group could archive threaded discussions on the priority topics they have identified. Rather than add to the overload of e-messages in one's in-box, having a group site accessible anywhere at any convenient time is much-preferred by participants and is felt to encourage more interaction, as opposed to the pushing of information out from a secretariat to the network participants.

7.8 Experiment with Affinity Groups that Include Sector Council Representatives

A final recommendation would be to experiment with the participation of representatives of employers and employee sector councils within some of the affinity groups. As we saw in Australia, their communities of practice included the broad range of partners from governments, employers, unions and colleges. Some participants, and some sector councils, would like to expand the notion of affinity group to include the full community of sectoral practice as opposed to solely the educators. They argue that the network needs to reflect the various partners involved in the common endeavour of more relevant, accessible and recognized learning. The question remains, would such a group become even more creative and relevant because of its more diverse membership of partners, or would it lose the trust and degree of affinity required and instead become a communication tool for joint projects? Similarly, it would be interesting to experiment with international networks of college administrators, faculty or students with a comparable affinity and potential common practice to see if the value of national networks expands or becomes diluted in a broader context. A lot more experimentation and research will be needed to propose any conclusions or recommendations on these questions.

In summary, we have seen the creation of a new organizational form, the knowledge network, which seems to meet some of the new needs, challenges and speed of our age. Preliminary indications are quite positive in terms of the potential contributions and added value of such affinity groups or networks, but we are still at a very early stage.

As Einstein implied in our opening quote, "Knowledge is experience. Everything else is just information", let us hope that we can develop the wisdom to make use of this new organizational form to reduce the growing information overload and replace it by the sharing of knowledge that is readily applicable to our daily experience and relevant to our communities and learners.

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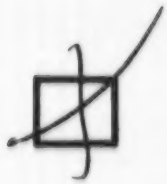

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